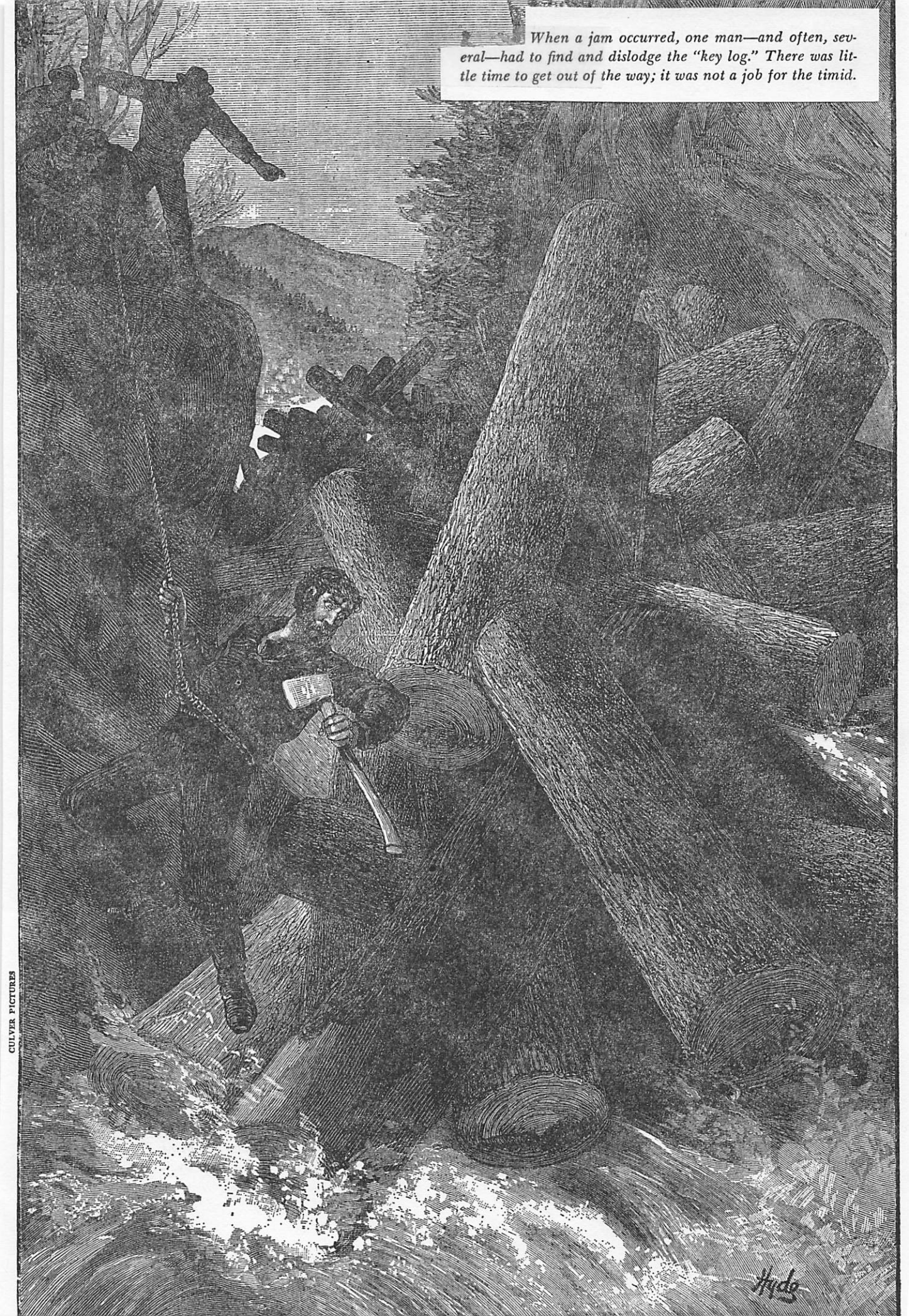
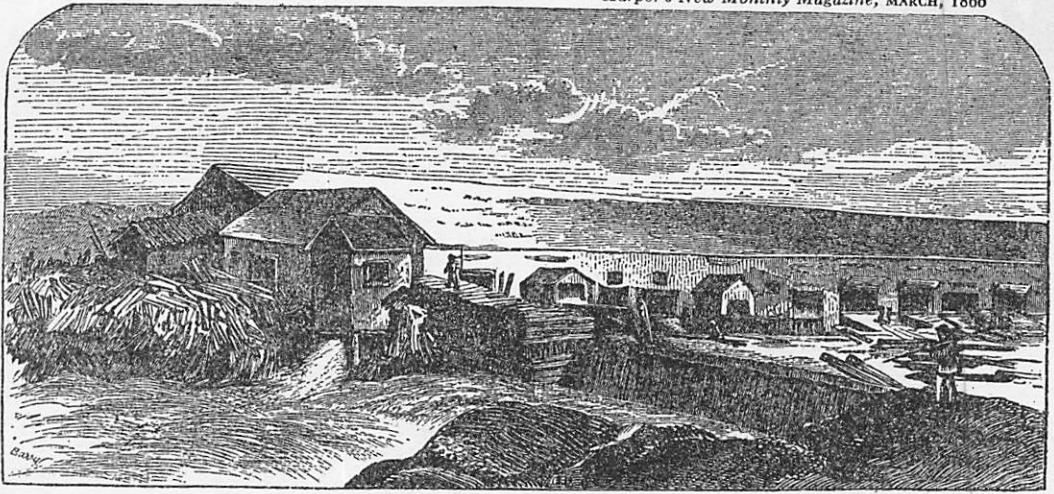


When a jam occurred, one man—and often, several—had to find and dislodge the “key log.” There was little time to get out of the way; it was not a job for the timid.





End of the line for the rivermen was the sawmill. This one was at Old Town, Maine, near Bangor.

ten feet deep with logs. Dan was right behind him on the same big spruce.

Another stirring incident that illustrates the riverman's quickness took place at Upper Dam, which is below Mooselookmeguntic Lake, one of the Rangeleys. Ten boom sticks—the logs used to encircle a boom or log enclosure—held together by toggle chains had been carefully worked around lengthwise into the current above the dam, to be sluiced through for use below. The boat's crew doing the work rowed hard to straighten out the boom before the powerful suction at the gate seized the forward end and pulled the line through with the speed of an express train. The last few logs, however, drew in upon one side of a narrow platform built as a V-shaped guide for the logs going through the sluice. Upon this platform four men were standing with pike poles to keep the logs running and straightened out. Suddenly a stray branch of dead wood caught between the toggle chains of the running boom, twisted out of the water, and swept down upon the men about knee-high. There was not a second for reflection; to be thrown into the whirling maelstrom that sucked through the gates meant death. The first man saw the danger, gave a cry of warning, turned and hurdled the flying stick, and came down catlike in his place. Instinctively, each of the others in succession did the same, no one losing his balance, and all landing rightside up and unhurt.

All these qualities of balance, judgment, and quickness, plus endurance and physical strength, constituted the essential equipment of even the least expert man who would go on drive. But there was, in addition, a deep "log sense" that came only with experience, and to some men more than to others. The tendencies of currents, the effect of the water's volume and swiftness,

the places where jams are likely to form and why, how to avoid pile-ups, where they would break, the probable situation of the key log, rollway-breaking, dam-running, and a thousand other technical details—a knowledge of all these things marked the riverman who rose to the top of his profession.

Many people who saw the riverman only at his worst moments—in town, after the drive was in, unkempt, drunk, roaring and fighting—forgot that those moments of violent relaxation constituted only three weeks out of fifty-two in the man's hard year. Most townspeople thought he must be weak in the head. That was not true. Many log-drivers did blow their hard-earned pay on wild sprees, but many more pocketed their wages and quietly went home to some New England farm to help with the haying. I have known others who went to Boston or Portland and spent the summer studying. Fred Noad, who started out carrying a cant dog (peavey) on his back like any ordinary riverman, ended up as Deputy Minister of Lands and Forests for Ontario. George Van Dyke, from the same start, became the wealthiest man in New Hampshire.

There aren't any rivermen any more, and it is nice to know that a modern lumberjack is far better off economically than the old-time riverman ever was. But as Ernest Martin Hopkins, the late president emeritus of Dartmouth College, wrote to me, "I know he is a damned sight less interesting!"

Robert E. Pike is now a writer and professor, but his respect for rivermen comes from first-hand knowledge. As a young man, he worked in various New England lumber camps. This article is based on a chapter of his Tall Trees, Tough Men, to be published this month by W. W. Norton.

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